Introduction

What is real, possible, and good when it comes to human beings thinking together about the real, the possible, and the good? In this book, these ultimate questions will be explored on their own terms, and will be made particular through a question that is often limited to history, anthropology, and religious studies, namely, "What is Islam?" This latter topic continues to attract a great deal of scholarly attention oriented toward establishing a "useful concept" of Islam or a guideline by which to judge something "Islamic," but it has deep metaphysical implications far beyond this definitional question's relevance to any particular research program. At root, the work at hand is both a philosophical treatise about shared thinking that uses the encounter between the Modern Project and Islam as an illustrative example, and also an exploration of the conceptualization of Islam in light of the metaphysics of consciousness and meaning.

The most common and consequential concepts scholars use to explore and conceptualize Islam are religion, culture, civilization, and tradition, but what are *they*? Islam itself is said to be one or more of them. They are the most basic, underlying ideas used to classify things as Islamic or not, yet one finds little consensus across the relevant fields in the humanities and social sciences as to what belongs in what category. Is some practice *religious* or *cultural*? Is some idea Islamic *religion* or Islamic *civilization*? Is Islam as a whole better thought of as a *tradition* or a *religion*? Disagreements about such questions are the rule, and convergence the exception. Furthermore, one cannot get around such divergences by resorting to the specialized versions of the terms "culture," "religion," "civilization," and "tradition" in the academic disciplines that are devoted to them, because one finds that these ubiquitous and essential ideas have remained undefined and seemingly undefinable (or have too many definitions, which amounts to the same

problem) for well over half a century, with no clear path forward for how to improve the situation.

This definitional problem reveals deeper philosophical questions. When human beings in the modern world want to name their most ultimate sense of belonging, or their collective state of wisdom and maturity, it is these ideas they reach for, yet even in academic scholarship the concepts culture, religion, civilization, and tradition remain at the level of folk knowledge and are not well defined, partly because these kinds of realities are much more mysterious than commonly assumed, and partly because of a certain reticence to explore the deepest reasons *why* they are so hard to define.

Not only can "we" not conceptualize Islam, "we" have yet to properly conceptualize the "we" that is doing the conceptualizing or to come to grips with the very nature of that collective act of conceptualization. What we all need, therefore, is a consistent, coherent, and comprehensive way of theorizing the nature of human beings in their act of thinking together and living as a conscious "we."

This book develops a comprehensive theory of the *institution* (a surprisingly undertheorized concept itself) that incorporates the metaphysics of consciousness and demarcates both the necessary and empirically variable features of all institutions. It then expands this concept's scope to include a category called *metaphysical institutions*: realities that constitute the social dimension of human beings navigating ultimate questions of what is real, what is possible, and what is good. The result is a universal rubric—the first time that this has been attempted—that enables one to navigate the conceptual space of the religious, the cultural, the civilizational, and the traditional. A persistent theme of the book is that many of the ambiguities and difficulties in existing theorizations of these ideas arise first and foremost from the way that we answer that most ultimate of questions: *What is a human being?* More specifically, how is the social element of human consciousness conceived?

The new model is put to use to analyze how the Modern Project thinks about Islam, touching on the relationship of authority and autonomy, rationality and imitation, the universal and the particular, and other important questions. The overall approach of the book is to delineate the parameters and dimensions of the conceptual space in which such questions can be systematically and transparently explored, by tackling universal problems of what it means for human beings to know, reason, create, and choose together, and makes these themes concrete by exploring the case of navigating the "Islamic" in the humanities and social sciences. Its central

method is logical and conceptual, taking important terms that have been poorly theorized, or whose theorizations are irretrievably contested, and placing them into a framework that will allow us to situate them against a larger horizon, rather than trying to stop using them (which is unlikely) or adding even more definitions to the pile (which is pointless), thus enabling greater understanding of social reality as well as greater sophistication and clarity for work in various fields.

At root this work is a philosophical treatise about ultimate questions, but one which simultaneously contributes to certain theoretical debates in various fields in the humanities and social sciences, as it engages existing viewpoints while offering its own solution to questions about the relationship of subjectivity and objectivity, essentialism and anti-essentialism, dynamism and change, and the interests of power versus the motives of purpose. In part it does this by drawing certain logical and metaphysical insights from within Islamic thought into a broader conversation, while also knocking down arbitrary walls between philosophy and the humanities and social sciences, especially as far as Islamic studies is concerned. Being "interdisciplinary," as that term is used today, already presupposes a certain division of intellectual disciplines in the modern world that is a reflection of a deep fragmentation of human thought resulting from a series of philosophical decisions that began in the early modern period in Europe and is now a defining feature of the Modern Project.[1] The interdisciplinarity of this book taps the spirit of Islamic intellectual culture at its height, where historians write about the spiritual life, philosophers write Quran commentaries, jurists write mystic treatises, theologians explore logic, mathematicians write poems, and poets teach law.[2] When one can, one should wander the landscape as if there were no borders, since those boundaries are only where we imagine them to be.

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Chapter 1, "What Kind of Thing Is Islam?," discusses the definitional hurdles related to the terms religion, culture, civilization, tradition, and institution, and brings out the underlying logical and metaphysical ambiguities that have plagued these concepts and the academic disciplines devoted to them for generations.

Chapter 2, "The Nature of Institutions and Shared Thinking," is a comprehensive presentation of the nature of institutions. Its three sections are meant to address the conceptual shortcomings described in chapter 1. Section 1 sets out the necessary or invariant features of all institutions;

section 2 lays out the nature of the empirical or contingent variation that can exist within those invariant parameters; and section 3 focuses on what institutions are not, namely, those realities that resemble some features of institutions but that must be distinguished from them.

Chapter 3, "The Metaphysics of Antidualism," is the first of three metaphysical chapters of part 2 of the book. The chapter's central theme is that antidualism as a general metaphysical stance—sometimes referred to as materialism, physicalism, naturalism, or scientism—makes the proper understanding of social reality impossible. This chapter begins to address the metaphysically laden concept of structure as well as the nature of basic validity claims related to rationality.

Chapter 4, "The Metaphysics of Meaning," turns to the nature of meaning and examines it in light of the model of institutions established in chapter 2, demonstrating that a conceptualization of human beings thinking together that attempts to remain within the strictures of antidualism can only be incoherent and self-undermining.

Chapter 5, "The Metaphysics of Paradox," discusses the nature of genuine paradox as it relates to consciousness and extends this to the nature of shared consciousness. The central theme of this chapter is that the difficulties of theorizing consciousness at the individual level do not disappear in the social domain, and that analytical clarity at the social level must take into account the difficulties of conceptualizing consciousness in the first place.

Chapter 6, "The Language Analogy," begins part 3 of the book, taking the general picture established by parts 1 and 2 and turning to the encounter between Islam and the Modern Project. It is an extended meditation on the nature of one language studying another, insofar as that encounter can be used as a template for understanding the relationship of metaphysical institutions with each other.

Chapter 7, "Project and Tradition," continues some of the themes of the language analogy from chapter 6 by incorporating the question of how metaphysics bears upon the encounter of the Modern Project with Islam, and specifically how the Modern Project's apex communities conceive of themselves as uniquely universal and how this self-image undermines its understanding of Islam and of itself.

Chapter 8, "One Islam, Many Islams, or No Islam?," brings the discussion to the academic humanities and social sciences. Against the backdrop of the conceptualization established in earlier chapters, it is a survey and evaluation of some of the most influential or representative attempts by modern scholars to conceptualize Islam.

The conclusion, "The Sighted Men and the Elephant," reflects upon how the ideas in this book can be used in the future, and how consideration of ultimate questions of the real, the possible, and the good must be a part of any useful discussion of human beings thinking together.

Readers can consult the end of each chapter to find a synopsis of the main points of that chapter.